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SUBJECT: DRC: NYAMULAGIRA VOLCANO ERUPTING AGAIN, FIRST
TIME SINCE 2004

REF: A: 02 KIGALI 456

B: KINSHASA 1787

¶1. (U) Summary. Mount Nyamulagira , a volcano some 30 kilometers (21 miles) north of Goma, began erupting on November 27 at 2000, the first time since 2004. One major lava flow from the active fissure at the southern base of the volcano was headed in a southwesterly direction towards Lake Kivu and threatened to cut the Goma-Sake road. Though no large human habitations were in the lava's path, the cutting off of Sake - a town which had only last week saw violence between renegade military elements and the Congolese army, would have seriously complicated the humanitarian and military situation in the area. The eruption has been winding down, however, and the lava flow has stopped far short of the road. Volcanologists warn that additional eruptions are possible, given the amount of magma that has accumulated underground not far from the surface, but have indicated that the negative consequences of this eruption are limited to effects on the environment caused by smoke during the eruption. End summary

¶2. (U) On November 26, seismic equipment around the two volcanoes north of Goma, North Kivu province, registered over 400 tremors. Nyamulagira volcano, said to be the most active volcano in Africa (ref A), has erupted at regular intervals over the last decade, most recently in 1996, 1998, 2000, 2001, and 2004. Lava from Nyamulagira is generally heavier, thicker and slower-moving than that from Nyiragongo volcano, which spread an estimated 15 to 20 million cubic meters of lava in 2002. Some large lava flows from Nyamulagira have reached Lake Kivu over the last hundred years; in 1948 lava flowed almost nonstop for nearly two years, crossing the Goma-Sake road to the south and significantly changing the shape of the Lake Kivu shoreline. Nyamulagira eruptions, however, pose little threat to human life, and it is virtually impossible for the flow to reach Goma, since it would have to travel uphill to get there. The 2004 eruption sent lava only northward, into the Virunga Park, where there are few human habitations.

¶3. (U) By December 1, during a flyover of the scene, OFDA rep and Jacques Durieux, foremost expert on the Kivu volcanoes, observed that lava flow from a fissure directly south of the Nyamulagira crater had traveled 14 of the 24 kilometers southwestward to the Goma-Sake road. Concern among humanitarian personnel and volcanologists in Goma was that, if this flow continued southward, it could cut off the main road from Goma westward, along the north end of Lake Kivu, towards Sake. Sake was the scene of fighting between integrated and non-integrated brigades of the Congolese military (FARDC) November 25-27. (ref B). Sake, on a main north-south route between North and South Kivu provinces, is normally a town of 30,000-40,000 people, many of whom fled during the recent fighting. Some went to Goma, while others moved to nearby towns along the main north-south road. Approximately 5,000 have taken shelter in villages along the Goma-Sake road. Humanitarian supplies for these displaced persons normally come from Goma, where there is an international airport with a relatively long runway. (Note: The runway of this airport was significantly shortened by a lava flow during the Nyiragongo eruption of January 2002 and no longer meets safety standards for many types of aircraft. End note.)

¶4. (U) By December 2, volcano monitoring equipment suggested that the eruption was increasing in force, but volcanologists could not verify this by air surveillance due to poor visibility. On Monday, December 4, the volcanologists had good views of both the fissure and the lava flows and were able to state confidently that this particular eruption seemed to be ending and that there were no longer any active lava flows. They cautioned, however, that additional eruptions could occur, given that, according to analysis of their measurements over the last two years, significant amounts of magma had risen to within 4 kilometers of the surface and that this eruption was probably too short to have exhausted the reservoir that had been building up there. They will be monitoring very closely all developments over the next few months.

¶5. (U) The only serious consequence of this Nyamulagira eruption appears to be the possible negative affects of the huge plume of smoke that extends across both the DRC and the ROC and all the way to Chad (which has already forced pilots to alter flight patterns). The eruption has increased the amount of sulfur dioxide in the air, which, if it finds its way into surface and ground waters, can have detrimental effects on human health. Cinders from the smoke landing on pastures are potentially dangerous to ruminants in the vicinity.

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